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Article published Sep 5, 2002

Sherrod ousted from BTW Center

By Kevin Flowers
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James C. Sherrod is out as executive director of the Booker T. Washington Center.

But neither Sherrod nor the board will say much else about why Sherrod is no longer running the nonprofit community center and that has city officials and others asking why.

City Council President James N. Thompson, Councilman Ian Murray and United Way of Erie County President Alan Perez said they want to know more about why Sherrod, 40, was ousted.

Sherrod was the center's executive director since 1998, but he has not worked at the center since early August.

The center's board named Anita Smith, the center's case management and housing program coordinator, as its interim director.

Sean Coleman, the board's vice president, issued a statement for the board Wednesday.

"At this time, our position is this is an internal personnel matter under review and investigation by the Board of Directors," Coleman said. "In respect of the confidential rights of Mr. James Sherrod, we can offer no comment at this time of our personnel, policies and past practices."

Board President James Hamilton did not return numerous telephone messages for two weeks seeking comment.

Smith, a nine-year center employee, said she is now handling the center's day-to-day operations.

Smith also would not discuss Sherrod's fate. "As far as Mr. Sherrod's situation, I really don't have any information about that," Smith said.

The center's board named Sherrod executive director in October 1998. Sherrod, a Mercyhurst College graduate, had been deputy director of operations at the Martin Luther King Center, 312 Chestnut St.

Sherrod had also served as the MLK Center's director of youth development from 1990 to 1997.

The United Way's Perez said he knows little about the situation. The United Way gave the Booker T. Washington Center \$235,411 this year for its meal assistance and homeless shelter programs, Perez said.

Perez said Coleman told him last week that the board "was looking for new leadership and decided to go in a different direction," with the top post.

"All the board told me is that they did ask for his resignation and they were working on a severance package," Perez said. "But no specifics beyond that. As a funding source of theirs, we expect to know about changes in leadership," he said.

Thompson said the board's apparent refusal to provide details about Sherrod's status "leads people to all kinds of speculation that could be wrong. The best thing for the board would be to face this thing head on. If they made a decision, the people have a right to know."

Thompson said the Booker T. Washington Center, like other neighborhood centers and social service agencies in Erie, "gets a lot of public money. That's another reason there should be some explanation about Mr. Sherrod."

In addition to the United Way's contribution, the center relies heavily on federal funds the city of Erie receives from the Department of Housing and Urban Development. The city each year distributes millions in federal funds to local social service agencies and nonprofit organizations.

City officials said Erie's three neighborhood centers — The Booker T. Washington Center, the Martin Luther King Center, 312 Chestnut St., and the John F. Kennedy Center, 2021 Buffalo Road — each received \$94,000 from the city this year. The centers have annual budgets of about \$900,000, city officials said.

Murray said "everyone's in the dark," regarding Sherrod's status.

"I don't understand it," Murray said. "I found James Sherrod to be refreshing ... someone who had good ideas about redeveloping the inner city," Murray said.

"And most importantly, he wanted to make sure Booker T. Washington was a partner in the future redevelopment of the city," Murray said.

Sherrod replaced Dorothy Lockett, who resigned as executive director of the Booker T. Washington Center in July 1998. Later that year, Lockett was sentenced to eight months in federal prison after admitting she stole goods valued at \$18,070, including groceries, household items and personal items, from the social service agency.

Lockett was one of four BTW Center employees who received either jail time or probation in the federal embezzlement conspiracy, which was investigated by the FBI and the U.S.

Inspector General's Office.

Perez said center officials should realize that "our donors are going to want answers" about Sherrod when the center's funding requests are reviewed by the United Way next spring.

"It's very important that we assure the community and our donors that our agencies are running effectively and efficiently. And I believe Booker T. is," Perez said. "But I hope specific reasons for the change in leadership are known in the near future."

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Article published Sep 13, 2002

Ousted BTW director says board hasn't told him why he's out

By [Kevin Flowers](#)
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James C. Sherrod had kept his silence after being ousted in mid-August as executive director of the Booker T. Washington Center.

Now he's talking, and claiming the center's board of directors hasn't explained why it wants him out.

"I didn't do anything wrong, or anything related to mishandling anything at the agency," Sherrod said Thursday. "And nobody on the board is claiming that I did anything wrong. ... They've just said they want to go in a different direction.

"I feel that I need to come out and clear my name," said Sherrod, 40. "I don't want people thinking I did anything inappropriate. I would never do anything to hurt the agency."

The Booker T. Washington Center provides various programs and services to low-income people and families in Erie. Sherrod, whom the center's board hired as executive director in October 1998, has not been to work since Aug. 12. An interim director now is in place.

Sherrod said board members claim his removal is not linked to an incident Aug. 6, in which an 8-year-old girl attending a center-sponsored "Movie Day" at the Tinseltown theater complex in Summit Township was left behind by center employees. Sherrod was on vacation at the time.

- ✓ The girl walked more than five miles from Tinseltown to the eastside home of a relative, arriving unharmed, according to sources familiar with the incident.

Three center employees responsible for supervising the outing were fired.

So far, the board has refused to publicly discuss why Sherrod was asked to resign. Officials from the center's funding sources, including the city of Erie and the United Way of Erie County, want more details and feel they have the right to know because the center at 1720 Holland St. relies heavily on local, state and federal funds.

Board spokesman and Vice President Sean Coleman last week released a prepared

statement calling the Sherrod situation "an internal personnel matter under review and investigation by the board of directors."

Sherrod said he changed his mind about speaking out after that statement was released because it "left a lot of questions unanswered and put a cloud over my name in the community."

"I didn't do anything wrong, or anything related to mishandling anything at the agency," he said.

Sherrod said he originally agreed to resign rather than be fired because a firing could make it tougher to find another job. Sherrod also said he is still waiting for a letter from the board outlining why it wants to make a change.

Sherrod said he is scheduled to meet Monday with the board's executive committee, and expects to discuss "how to resolve all this amicably," including details of a severance package.

Coleman, asked Thursday about the meeting, said the board is "working out something that's very beneficial to both the agency, James and the community."

City Councilman Mel Witherspoon, council's liaison to the neighborhood center, said Sherrod's status needs to be resolved soon.

"Whatever needs to be worked out, get it worked out expeditiously, where both parties are satisfied with the outcome, and move toward searching for a new director," Witherspoon said.

Sherrod previously was deputy director of operations and director of youth development at the Martin Luther King Center.

Sherrod said he worked hard to start programs aimed at revitalizing the center-city neighborhoods the center serves.

He said there was friction at times between him and some board members, but nothing serious.

"Anytime you're involved in an organization with many individuals, you're going to have situations that arise," Sherrod said. "You may have to convince naysayers this or that is the right thing for the organization. But sometimes you have to get used to it and get over it."

Sherrod said he is unsure what the future holds, but wants to continue working on urban renewal projects in Erie.

"I stayed in Erie when a lot of other people were leaving town because I wanted to be part of rebuilding the inner city," Sherrod said. "I feel like this is what I'm supposed to do."

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Article published Sep 12, 2002

Right to clarity

Sherrod had been the center's executive director since 1998. He has not worked there since August. The board has commented only with the enigmatic, "This is an internal personnel matter under investigation and review. ... In respect for the confidential rights of Mr. James Sherrod, we can offer no comment at this time on our personnel, policies and past practices."

This is insufficient.

The center is a community institution receiving public funds. For example, the United Way gave the center \$325,411 this year for two of its programs. The center also receives \$94,000 from the Department of Housing and Urban Development, channeled though the city of Erie.

Donors want answers. If they hear "No comment," they naturally have questions. Why should any donor give to a non-profit organization which will not discuss its "personnel, policies and past practices"?

Do not equate this to support or non-support for Sherrod. Perhaps the board had good reason to act. But perhaps not.

Those who help pay the bills have the right to some clarity. The board's bureaucratic evasions cloud over Sherrod's reputation — and its own.
